

7.7.4. INTERPRETATION PROBLEMS IN DISTRICT ADMINISTRATION

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Editor's Note: This chapter is predominantly a historical study and discussion, and it has therefore been decided to leave references to 'districts' and 'sub-districts' unchanged in their previous meanings and not to alter them to bring them in line with the present nomenclature.

7.7.4.1. INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

This chapter initially attempts to show how the basic features of pre-colonial Papua New Guinea society and the methods of colonial administration raised the need for interpretation services. It then describes the main features of the services that were created to meet this need. There follows an examination of the three salient features of the work of interpreters in district administration. The conclusion attempts to predict the future of these three features.

7.7.4.2. THE LANGUAGE SITUATION, AND OFFICIALS

In 1884 Papua New Guinea entered the phase of its history during which it was to be a colony of western powers.¹ The colonial powers adopted a system of district administration through which to govern the 180,000-odd square miles of territory for which they had assumed responsibility. Progressively the territory was divided into a number of districts, each of which was subdivided into sub-districts. As government intensified its functions, districts and sub-districts increased in number, and, *pari passu*, reduced in size. Each district included a head station, and each sub-district its station. Administration and departmental officials lived and worked at these stations. They thus were foci of government activities, and points of continuous contact between officials (immigrant) and the public (largely indigenous).

Papua New Guinea society had no formalised institutions of government covering large aggregations of people through which the colonial powers could govern indirectly. All types of government activities thus required direct dealings between expatriate officials and an indigenous public. A village officialdom was created to facilitate these dealings. In the other fields of Western activity that rapidly appeared - that is Christian evangelisation, commerce, and primary industry - similar direct dealings characterised interpersonal relationships between indigenes and expatriates.

Papua New Guinea's complex distribution of frequently mutually unintelligible languages adjacent to each other, with each used by a comparatively small number of speakers, is well known. In any one sub-district therefore the government personnel posted there would be working with a public speaking any one of up to 20 languages. How, then, did government personnel and members of the public talk to each other? On the one hand European languages were used by the dominant immigrants. Apart from German in German New Guinea between 1884 and 1914, English was used. On the other hand were the 700-odd indigenous languages. Rapidly developing from 1884, and coming into use in the linguistic middle ground, were the two *lingue franche*, Pidgin and Hiri Motu.

Few Papua New Guineans learned English until 1945 when a national primary education programme commenced. By 1966 no more than perhaps 10% of the indigenous population could claim literacy in English,² and the great majority of this percentage was concentrated in towns. Few immigrant 'Europeans' learnt any of the indigenous languages.³ For those government personnel who could overcome the daunting problems of learning without materials or tuition what were most likely to be highly difficult languages, the further problems of choice of language had to be faced. In ten years a government official may have served on five or six stations dealing with a population among whom 50 perhaps radically different languages were spoken. Clearly whilst government personnel could pick up a smattering of one or two languages, they could not be expected to learn indigenous languages to use in their dealings with the public.

What was probably the only official attempt to organise courses teaching indigenous languages to government personnel as a career training element was made in the late 1950s. This attempt has had no currently recognisable effect on the Public Service.

The emergence of Pidgin and Hiri Motu met the need for a language common to indigenes and immigrants. Large numbers of Papua New Guineans learnt one or both of them as part of their adjustment to the national

culture, emerging in competition with discrete village or tribal cultures.⁴ At the other end of the language spectrum a significant fraction of expatriates whose work involved day to day dealings with Papua New Guineans also learnt one (or both) of the *lingue franche*.

7.7.4.3. INTERPRETERS

However, there have been and still are innumerable day to day situations in which government business has to be transacted between an official and a member (or members) of the public who have no common language. These situations raise the need for interpreters. Sometimes, of course, one of the public on the spot interprets on an *ad hoc* basis. But there has always been a need for a body of specialist interpreters to work in districts.

Two types of interpreters are used - village interpreters (or *tultuls*), and station interpreters. The office of *tultul* originated in the Territory of New Guinea, and with few exceptions, *tultuls* were appointed only in New Guinea. *Tultuls* achieved their honorary office by appointment made under the Native Administration Ordinance. Each lives in his own village and is on call to visiting government personnel. However, in New Guinea districts the number of *tultuls* has been steadily reduced since the early 1950s, until at the time of writing in late 1973 it is only about 250. This resulted from a government policy of abolishing the office in all villages incorporated into local government councils. Thus in those sections of New Guinea in which station interpreters have not been appointed, the commencement of local government has meant the termination of official interpretation services.

Station interpreters have been appointed in Papua since 1884. They are salaried members of the Public Service employed full-time at government establishments. The statutory basis for their employment has varied from time to time.⁵ Conditions of engagement have steadily improved and most station interpreters are now career public servants.⁶ However some are employed on a temporary basis. In 1973 the Division of District Administration (the organisation within the government responsible for district administration) employed approximately 170 station interpreters. These were posted throughout the country in twos and threes in all the Papuan districts and in some districts of New Guinea. There were historical reasons for this extension of a Papuan practice into New Guinea.

Since 1945, as government expanded into areas hitherto unadministered, the Papuan policy for provision of station interpreters was adopted in the four New Guinea highlands districts and also in the newly

administered sub-districts of some other districts such as West Sepik and Morobe. However, in many instances, tultuls were also appointed in villages in these areas.

In summary therefore there were in late 1973, about 170 station interpreters and 250 tultuls working.⁷ Whilst the bases of their service differed, and the methods and criteria by which they were selected also differed, many of the features of their work were similar.

Because few station or village interpreters had had any formal schooling and had not otherwise learnt English, their interpretations were in most cases from a vernacular into one of the *lingue franche* known by the official for whom they were interpreting. Many taught themselves a wide selection of English words which were useful in interpretation.

7.7.4.4. THREE FEATURES CHARACTERISING THE WORK OF INTERPRETERS

Three features characterise the work of interpreters in district administration in Papua New Guinea. The first of these is of a basic culture/linguistic nature. The second concerns the verification of skills in interpreters. And the third deals with the genesis of professional ethics.

7.7.4.4.1. DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE PAPUA NEW GUINEAN AND WESTERN CULTURAL AND LINGUISTIC SET-UPS

The first feature about interpretation is of a basic culture/linguistic nature. It is a truism that there are vast differences between Papua New Guinea 'culture' (if such a broad generalisation has any validity) and Western culture. These differences are reflected in the scale of the differences between these languages. This does not refer only to differences in syntax and morphology, phonology, and vocabulary which are all real enough. Rather it refers to the differences between each culture (and language) in: (a) their total stores of knowledge; (b) their sources of new knowledge and the value each puts on each of its sources; (c) the schemes by which each works out relationships between units of knowledge; and (d) the categories into which each divides its store of knowledge.

English serves an urban, technological, industrial, society with centralised and specialised institutions. In almost diametric opposition, Papua New Guinea languages serve micro-rural societies that are on the subsistence level in economics, preliterate and generally un-specialised.

In other words, the languages on both sides of the situation are each laden with ideas, concepts, values, and systems of relationships between things quite different to each other; which, in any case, could not always be adequately, economically, and elegantly translated to and from the other. Perhaps individuals with the capacity and leisure fully to understand each culture and language could perceive the intellectual and linguistic relationships necessary to find common ground. Most station and village interpreters are capable of achieving, and therefore wisely aspire to, lesser aims.

In practice, of course, experience did much to help interpreters find ways out of the general difficulties outlined above. Whilst they would be required to interpret over a wide range of matters, this range would include topics that tend to re-occur in broadly similar terms. This range of matters would have increased from the last decades of the 19th century to the 70s of the 20th century.

In its early phases government concentrated on exploration, pacification, and law and order. Any interpreter working, for example, on his ninth murder investigation would probably find many points of familiarity between it and earlier cases. But 80 years later the work of district administration has expanded to include involvement in fostering modernisation through political, economic and social change. This rapid enlargement of the stock of ideas, attitudes, and techniques in constant use in district administration in the fourth, fifth, sixth and seventh decades has strained the capacity of interpreters to interpret. Nevertheless in the same way as law and order administration dealt with repetitive issues, so could an interpreter build on his experience of repeated topics and situations in development administration.

7.7.4.4.2. COMPETENCE OF INTERPRETERS IN LANGUAGES

The second feature about station interpreters is the inability of the employing authority to be certain of the competence of the appointee in the languages which he is appointed to interpret. In all cases this would be one indigenous language and one (or two) of the *lingue franche*. Additionally, many station interpreters claimed competence in perhaps up to four or five indigenous languages, and were expected to interpret them from time to time. It is only in the last decade that there has been any substantial literature on Papua New Guinea languages and much of this is not necessarily readily available to officials concerned with appointments. In any case, a very large fraction of the languages remain unstudied. This general lack of documentation means it is impossible

scientifically to test an appointee in the languages in which he is required to be proficient, although of course in post-war years specific interpretation skills could have been tested.

Usually however, the recommending official sought the opinion of local persons, generally personnel serving on the station. Their opinions were not necessarily informed and objective, as it was unlikely that they would be proficient in the relevant languages.

Proven skills in the designated languages could not thus be expected of station interpreters. Apart from doubt about their competence in the relevant languages, the only training station interpreters received was on the job training from those with longer service than themselves. There were no formalised training courses arranged by those with the necessary specific skills. No doubt many of the interpreters had innate skills; but no doubt also learning on the job often resulted in technical sterility and general obsolescence of techniques.

This situation was perhaps often compounded by an absence of skill in using interpretation services among those government personnel and members of the public using them. But interpreters could be relied upon generally to exercise ingenuity sufficient to bridge gaps in their knowledge and if necessary conceal from their seniors any deficiencies in their work. But this is a serious drawback of the system.

In the case of tultuls, the office was generally perceived, in a de facto way, as being one of potential importance in village politics. The office of 'Luluai', senior in a village, generally went to the nominee of the prime faction: the office of tultul similarly went to the nominee of the second faction. Political interest rather than language ability could thus be expected to dominate the motives of those sponsoring a new appointee. There was usually a wide choice, as a tultul had only to speak his village language and Pidgin.

There are some practical checks on interpretation in situations in which settlement of an issue between two parties is sought. Each party at the settlement generally maintains a running check on the accuracy of the interpretation, and is free to dispute any inaccuracies that seem to jeopardise its interests. Resolution of such challenges, however, could seldom be on the basis of linguistic verities, rationally established.

7.7.4.4.3. RELATIONSHIP OF PUBLIC SERVANTS TO THE PUBLIC IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA

The third feature arises from the relationship of public servants to the public in Papua New Guinea. Expatriate public servants working

in Papua New Guinea operate on traditions of public service derived from those which took shape in Britain in the middle of the 19th century. These stress the obligation of a public servant to give honest, diligent and loyal service to his seniors and the service. These ideals have been rapidly embraced by nationals in the Public Service in Papua New Guinea as a national public service has developed.⁸ In the early years of the colonial regime loyalties of outstation personnel tended to focus on individual officials. The police force in particular developed strong loyalties and *esprit de corps*; this was helped by ordered daily routines, uniforms, direct and continuous contact with seniors. Commonly, members served away from their home area and therefore away from family and other primary social obligations.

Station interpreters also developed pride in their work, the very nature of which kept them involved at the centre of public affairs in their own community, and in a network of interpersonal obligations of many sorts to their kin and others. The need to reconcile these obligations, sometimes in conflict with their loyalty to government, must have been constant. Even so, station interpreters had more room for manoeuvre and compromise between pressures and loyalties than village interpreters would have had. A tultul's world was a village - a tight system of intimate obligations, the discharge of which were subject to public review. Interpretation was commonly done in the hearing of their neighbours whose interests may either be enhanced or diminished, depending on the outcome of the issue being determined, with the assistance of the tultul.

Interpreters' services are generally required when the even tenor of village life has been disturbed by some unlawful event. They are thus important in the process which initiates a restoration of harmony and balance in the village. It is thus not surprising that members of the public they serve expect them to go outside the simple role of interpretation, and act as *de facto* advocates who have the advantage of knowing the system and therefore have the attributed capacity to manipulate it. It would indeed be surprising if immediate parochial social obligations did not sometimes dominate an interpreter's work, in defiance of his emergent 'professional' standards. That the system works at all provides evidence of the calibre of the individuals and their appreciation of the societal value of the function they are performing.

The dilemma of interpreters is a simple one. The idea of loyalty to an organisation is one that they have to learn '*de novo*'. But they are products of, and remain embedded in, societies with traditions of absolute loyalty to family and clan.

7.7.4.5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

These three factors that make difficult the function of interpretation in district administration have existed since the commencement of administration, and they are unlikely to disappear. The effect of the first factor will wane as more and more Papua New Guineans receive primary and secondary education and so achieve a sounder understanding of Western culture in general and in particular those aspects of it that are influential in modernising Papua New Guinea culture. But the spread of improvement that these new skills will make in interpretation in rural situations is unlikely to be dramatic.

Similarly, it is difficult to imagine the study of language in Papua New Guinea proceeding at a speed that will provide documented and scholarly studies of all languages in the next few decades. The scale of academic resources necessary for such an advance are unlikely to be available. Whilst various universities maintain scholars in the field and the Summer Institute of Linguistics has commenced a wide range of studies, a significant number of languages in Papua New Guinea remains unstudied. The situation in which an applicant for an interpreter's position can be properly tested in the languages he is required to speak is not yet in sight.

It is in the third factor that some improvement can be expected. A national public service is emerging rapidly in Papua New Guinea in response to the tempo of national constitutional development and a growing public interest in and concern with national political affairs. Improvement in the *esprit de corps*, an enhanced awareness of public service standards, and a growth in loyalty to the new nation state among the corps of interpreters may well result from specific training courses and the consolidation of the national public service.

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N O T E S

1. Great Britain, Germany and Australia were variously involved as Metropolitan power. Japan conquered and administered parts of Papua New Guinea between 1942 and 1945.
2. Bureau of Statistics, Population Census 1966, Preliminary Bulletin No.20.
3. Most of the exceptions were missionaries.
4. Pidgin has well over 1,000,000 speakers, and Hiri Motu up to 230,000.
5. Relevant statutes are listed hereunder:
 - (a) From 1905 to 1947: Native Crown Servants Ordinance (Papua)
 - (b) From 1947 to 1960: Native Labour Ordinance (Papua and New Guinea)
 - (c) From 1960 to 1964: Administration Servants Ordinance (Papua and New Guinea)
 - (d) From 1964 to date: Public Service Ordinance (Papua and New Guinea).
6. Currently (late 1973) the public service includes only one class of interpreter. Qualification for the position is simply the ability to 'translate' (sic), and the salary range is \$890-\$1,125. By comparison, the first four classes of Clerk (one to four) include among qualifications for the position possession of the School Certificate (satisfactory completion of Form 4). The class one salary range is \$930-\$1,255, and the class four range is \$1,905-\$2,115. After about ten years' service, a clerk may well achieve double the salary of an interpreter with 20 years' service.

7. Department of the Chief Minister and Development Administration records.

8. This process has only recently gathered momentum. Much remains to be achieved in this sensitive and vital field.